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ABSTRACT

Presented in a question-answer format, this article on teaching technical writing at the college level anticipates the concerns facing the beginning instructor. Following an explanation of technical writing and how it differs from other writing, the article discusses where technical courses are taught, explains the difference between technical writing programs in two-year colleges and those in universities, suggests that the teacher assigned to a technical writing course have previous experience teaching other kinds of writing, considers instructional materials, and explains how to acquire additional training in technical writing. (RB)

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SO YOU'RE GOING TO TEACH TECHNICAL WRITING: A PRIMER FOR BEGINNERS

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by
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Brigham Young University

You have just returned from the departmental office. You have gone through the routine of protesting that you are a specialist in Renaissance poetry. You have even lain down on the floor, screamed, kicked your heels and held your breath, but it has been to no avail. Your chairperson has remained implacable. The assignment stands. You *will* teach technical writing next term.

When I say *you*, I assume that I am talking to the beginner who is seeking means of survival. I will not presume to instruct John Walter and Herman Estrin.

As a beginner you want to know many things about teaching technical writing, and what I say here is based on the questions raised most often in this and other conferences over many years and on my own experience in teaching technical writing for fifteen years in three universities and in establishing technical writing programs in two of them. Some of the old hands may disagree with me on details, but long association tells me that our disagreements will be more on tactics than on strategy. So let us begin with the questions and some basic answers.

First, *What is Technical Writing?*

Several texts define technical writing as writing about engineering, science and technology. In the earlier history of technical writing it was confined almost entirely to engineering. Success in programs of teaching engineers to write has led to a spreading of technical writing programs first to the physical sciences then to the biological sciences and more recently to the social sciences and to various technician training programs.

How is technical writing different from other writing?

As the previous discussion suggests, the distinction between technical writing and other kinds lies not entirely in the fact that it is

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From a paper read at the Conference of College Composition and Communication, 1974, Anaheim, California.

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about technical subjects. Indeed it may be about subjects that have been considered non-technical. Rather the basis of technical writing is that it is objective rather than subjective and is more concerned with the quantitative rather than the qualitative. It places great emphasis on adaptation of the material to suit an intended reader. It utilizes freely such communication devices as headings, captions, informational outlines, lists, tables, charts, photos, etc. Its prime parameter is clarity.

To paraphrase Paul:

> Though I speak with tongues of men and of angels and have not clarity I become as sounding brass and tinkling cymbal (symbol). Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and have not clarity it profiteth me nothing.
>
> Clarity suffereth long, envieth not, vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly but rejoiceth in truth.
>
> Clarity never faileth. And now abideth beauty, power, and clarity, but the greatest of these is clarity.

In short, the subject matter of technical writing is objective, quantitative truth expressed in whatever means will convey it clearly and efficiently, with a careful avoidance of bias and with esthetic considerations entirely subservient to the other aims.

Where are technical writing courses taught?

While courses in technical writing have been taught in the past primarily in four-year institutions, they are increasingly being taught as part of two-year institutions, they are increasingly being taught as part of two-year technical programs in community and junior colleges, technical institutes and even high schools. There are also many in-house technical writing programs being taught in industry and in government agencies.

Where is the best place to teach Technical Writing?

In terms of student understanding, development, maturity and motivation, the best place is certainly in the third or fourth year of a four-year program. Obviously such placement is no help to the two-year terminal student. Nor does it help the four-year student in the

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writing of term papers during this sophomore year. It can be taught anywhere, from high school to graduate school but placing it early in the student's program means that he will be less mature, will be less motivated by close career needs and perhaps most importantly, will lack subject matter to write about.

Are there other differences in technical writing as taught in the university and technical writing in two-year terminal programs?

Yes there are. Technical Writing in the four-year program can be and should be not only more rigorous, more intellectual and more concerned with theory, it should emphasize strongly the writing for a variety of audiences and in a variety of situations.

Technical Writing on the two-year level will emphasize the practical writing of routine reports usually intended to be read within the organization. Usually it will require extra emphasis on mechanical correctness.

No snobbishness is intended in this answer, but there must be a recognition of the roles that the students will play after graduation.

Who should teach Technical Writing?

Three obvious choices present themselves. The technical person, the technical writer,and the English teacher. Each has advantages and shortcomings.

The technical man—scientist, engineer, or technician—knows a subject matter well, but is usually short on proficiency and interest in presentational skills. Further, his subject matter expertise is usually limited to a single area. The mechanical engineer is not very much help to the zoologist. In addition, the technical man may be too expensive.

The technical writer from industry may seem like the best possible choice to teach technical writing, but he too presents some problems. First, he may lack academic credentials that would make him acceptable to degree conscious institutions—at least if they wish to hire him at a salary and grade comparable to those he has held in industry. But more importantly, his experience is often very concrete and practical but rather narrow. Usually he has had experience with only a few kinds of reports within a single firm or industry. There is a world of difference between doing the task and teaching the task, and we have found that while some of the ex-industry technical

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writers can teach the course in the university successfully, most lack the necessary breadth of experience.

That leaves finally the English (or journalism) teacher. He—or she—has a breadth of language experience and is usually easier to train for the job than either of the other two.

Can any English teacher teach Technical Writing?

No. Teachers must be carefully selected in a number of ways. Perhaps the most important criterion for the teacher of technical writing is curiosity and interest in the subject matter. The teacher must respect science and technology as legitimate academic disciplines that are not inferior to literature. Advanced academic training in the sciences is not necessary to begin teaching technical writing, but an interest in learning and a respect for other fields is. Ideally that retread English teacher should have a previous background in teaching legitimate expository writing. It will also help to have a solid knowledge of contemporary usage and grammar.

How can such an English teacher understand papers on chemical engineering and microbiology?

This seemingly formidable problem is less serious than you might suppose. You can first require students to write so that you can understand them. They will grouse a bit but the experience will be useful to them and most will come through beautifully. Second, you will find that teaching students in archeology, physical therapy, electrical engineering, and refrigeration technology will quickly give you a very broad—though perhaps not deep—education in those fields. That learning can be one of the most exciting things about teaching technical writing.

What kind of texts are available?

Every major text publisher has one or more texts on the market. Most of these fall into two major categories: those designed as reference handbooks and those intended for classroom use. While the handbooks are useful for the practicing technical man, the classroom texts are probably more useful in a formal course. Without inappropriately hawking specific texts from this pulpit, I will say that my own preference is for a text that is organized on essentially rhetorical principles rather than for one organized on types of reports. I believe the breadth of view possible with such a text makes the student more adaptable to a wider variety of occupational

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writing tasks. If I taught primarily two year technical students I might choose the text organized according to report types (preliminary report, progress report, final report, etc.)

Besides a basic text, what else will be needed?

There are a number of readers on the market that will prove useful or you might choose to use as supplements such technical and non-technical magazines as *Scientific American, Road and Track* and *Popular Mechanics.* These prove especially useful for teaching such concepts as reader adaptation and effective use of visual aids.

How can I get additional training as a teacher of technical writing?

A few universities offer advanced programs in technical writing. Among these are Rensselaer Polytech and Purdue. These are programs aimed at training the professional technical writer or editor as distinguished from programs which train the "amateur" who is primarily engineer, scientist, or technician but must learn to write his own reports. The great majority of courses are designed for such amateurs. Taking courses under either a professional or amateur program would certainly be helpful but there are many teachers who are teaching good courses who have never had a course taught by an experienced teacher. At Brigham Young we insist that new technical writing teachers either do that or team teach a section jointly with an experienced teacher. We have applied this rule even to Ph.D. full professors—including the department chairman, who was apprenticed to a younger instructor. Incidentally they both enjoyed it and profitted from it.

At Bowling Green of Ohio, where I am currently guest faculty, I have several faculty members sitting in the courses I am teaching. Their intent is to continue the course after I return to my home university.

Other possibilities include not only the session of this conference but such workshops as that offered at the last NCTE in Philadelphia in November. There forty-two participants spend three days with Herman Estrin, John Walter, Neli Ann Pickett, Don Cunningham, and me in a three day training session.

I would, of course, recommend that you join and profit from the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing by sending $3.00 to

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John Walter at the University of Texas at Austin. *The Technical Writing Teacher*, published three times a year by the association, can provide much helpful advice. The association's activities and usefulness will expand as its membership increases.

Can a teacher of literature find happiness as a teacher of technical writing?

The answer there is yes, and for several reasons:

First, he has a better chance of finding a job—the market for teachers of technical writing is considerably better than the market for those who can teach only literature.

Second, there are also other financial rewards. Many technical writing teachers have the chance to write freelance, to edit technical books and articles, and to teach in-service writing and courses in business, industry, and government agencies. Such consulting commonly pays $100 to $200 a day, and up. Few teachers of literature have such opportunities. Such side work can, incidentally, be intellectually challenging and socially useful besides being financially profitable.

Third, there is a sense of satisfaction in teaching technical writing because both teacher and student recognize that learning is occurring. Students write far better reports at the end of the course than they do at the beginning. The teacher can see that improvement and so can the student, and that recognition is ultimately the most important reward of all.